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The Canadian Sports Scene Dominated by Hockey - Baseball a Footnote

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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Last Thursday morning I was awakened by a voice with a slightly different accent reciting the score of every hockey game that had taken place in Canada the previous night. Clearly there are more hockey teams than gas stations in Canada. As usual the CBC announcer told me the major league baseball scores only from the games involving Montreal and Toronto, no others. There was one concession as the Barry Bonds watch was mentioned.

The pennant races were irrelevant. The puck had been dropped. Welcome to Halifax on the morning after the opening of the NHL regular season.

So here I was watching, or trying to watch the regular season come to its delayed conclusion, while simultaneously participating in a four-day conference on hockey. The Minnesotan within me still occasionally demands to get out.

In fairness to Canadians they do cover baseball in the newspapers and on television, especially the sports channels. They even have "SportsCentre" on TSN; different spelling but same format. Although hockey was the lead on every broadcast of SportsCentre, they did cover baseball and carried the Bonds at-bats once he reached 70. They offered major coverage of number 70 including the press conference that followed.

So as this marvelous baseball season came to its delayed conclusion I watched from a distance, but with no less interest. And what a season it was!

Barry Bonds finished with 73 home runs cruising past Mark McGwire with some ease as it turned out, but not because it was made easy by opposing pitchers. San Francisco was still in a pennant race until the record was broken, and the Giants were facing their leading competitors down the stretch, with the exception of Houston which itself was in a pennant race.

It seemed that in the last two weeks of the season Bonds was being walked two to three times a game and getting hit with some frequency, while seeing only one or two pitches a game that he could hit. What was remarkable was the fact he hit many of those out of the park. He was not being pitched

to, and indeed should not have been. That he broke McGwire's record under these circumstances added to his remarkable achievement.

Bonds not only sailed by McGwire's record, but he set a new record for walks in a season, broke Ruth's record for slugging percentage, had the best RBI production of his career, and had an on-base percentage better than anyone since 1957 and the best in the National League since 1900.

To me the fact the Barry Bonds is not liked by the press, fellow players, and legions of baseball fans only adds to the appeal of his achievements. The beauty of his unpopularity is that no one will insist that he is a wonderful person because of his athletic achievement. The separation of achievement from character will be sustained, as it should be. No one will argue that because Barry Bonds is a great player, he is a great person or a hero to be emulated.

Barry Bonds teaches the fundamental lesson of sport that we all must learn. Performance and achievement do not mean quality of character or the status as role model. If someone is a great athlete it does not mean they are a great person. It means only that this athlete is someone who has developed their skills to an extremely high level. No more, no less. Thank you, Barry.

In addition to Bonds this was a season of greatness for many others. Rickey Henderson passed Ty Cobb in runs scored last week and collected his 3,000th hit on Sunday in the last game of the season. This adds to his career records for walks, stolen bases, and lead off home runs.

Tony Gwynn and Cal Ripken ended their marvelous careers this past weekend and this guarantees they will enter the Hall of Fame together in five years. Sammy Sosa ended the season with 64 home runs becoming the only player in the history of the game to hit more than sixty home runs in three seasons.

The Seattle Mariners won 116 games tying the single season total for wins thus ending a near magical regular season after losing Alex Rodriguez to free agency, following earlier losses of Ken Griffey, Jr. and Randy Johnson. No small part of the magic came from the Japanese sensation Ichiro who demonstrated conclusively that Japanese players

can do more than pitch at the major league level. In the process he radically altered the programming on Japanese television, the tourism habits of Japanese baseball fanatics who indulged themselves to an Ichiro weekend in Seattle, and brought Asian-Americans into the ballparks across America in big numbers.

As a bonus to all of these achievements the National League pennant races went down to the last week, and in one case to the last day.

Let's hope it is all just prelude.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't need to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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